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Aden claims retaking Mukalla from separatists

• UAE issues call for restraint; Saudi Arabia summons factions to Riyadh for 'comprehensive' talks • FM Dar speaks with Saudi counterpart about regional situation

MUKALLA : Yemen's Saudi-backed and internationally recognised government said on Saturday it had retaken control of Mukalla, the key eastern port in Yemen and capital of Hadramaut province, from separatists who seized it last month.

The rapid government gains since Friday have reversed many of the advances made by the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and cast doubt on viability of its intention to hold a referendum on "independence".

As the fighting threatened to upend the regional order, the United Arab Emirates urged de-escalation, saying it was "deeply concerned" by the violence. Saudi Arabia appealed for factions to convene for talks in Riyadh.

Saudi-backed forces said on Friday they had made advances and taken control of key locations in Hadramaut, a large province with stretches of desert along the Saudi border.

By Saturday, military officials announced that "all military and civilian facilities" in Mukalla, the provincial capital, had "been secured". An official said the military had seized the city's principal military base.

The STC confirmed the loss of territory. An STC official said there had been a "retreat of our forces" from the Al-Khasha area following "intense" Saudi airstrikes.

The official said a separate strike on the Barshid camp, west of Mukalla, resulted in fatalities. He did not provide a specific number.

Witnesses in Mukalla described a breakdown in security accompanied by looting, though Saudi-backed forces appeared to advance with little resistance.

UAE calls for dialogue

The conflict triggered an immediate diplomatic response. The UAE released a statement saying Yemenis should prioritise dialogue to safeguard security and stability.

Saudi Arabia, in a statement posted by its foreign ministry to social media, called for "a comprehensive conference in Riyadh to bring together all southern factions to discuss just solutions to the southern cause". Riyadh said the Yemeni government had issued the invitation for talks.

Overnight, Presidential Council chief Rashad al-Alimi confirmed he had asked Saudi Arabia to host a forum to resolve the southern issue.

Tensions boiled over early this week when Saudi Arabia bombed a base in Hadramaut and demanded all remaining UAE forces in Yemen depart, calling the separatist expansion a "red line" for its security.

The STC responded with accusations that "northern Islamist factions" — a reference to the Islah party within the recognised government — had targeted civilians. The group appealed for international intervention against what it described as a "Saudi-backed military escalation".

In a clear signal of its secessionist intent, the STC announced on Friday the start of a two-year transitional period leading to a referendum on independence for a new "South Arabian state".

Aidaros Alzubidi, the STC chief, said the process would include dialogue with Yemen's Houthi-controlled north, but warned the group would declare independence "immediately" if there was no dialogue or if southern Yemen was attacked again.

The political infighting has also disrupted travel. Aden airport, the hub for areas outside Houthi control, has been closed since Thursday amid disputes over flight restrictions. The STC stated on Saturday that southern Yemen was being subjected to a land, sea, and land blockade.

Separately, Pakistan expressed support on Saturday for Yemen's territorial integrity and the Saudi-led push for de-escalation.

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar on Saturday had a phone call with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan shortly after landing in Beijing, the Foreign Office (FO) said.

In a post on X today, the FO stated that the pair "deliberated on the recent situation in the region" during the phone call.

"The DPM/FM welcomed the Saudi foreign ministry's statement regarding Yemen and appreciated the efforts of all sides to resolve the regional situation amicably," the FO stated.

Meanwhile, FO also welcomed the call by Yemen's presidential council to hold a dialogue in Riyadh, urging all stakeholders to engage in "good faith" toward a negotiated political solution.

The FO expressed Pakistan's hope that, guided by the principles of unity and brotherhood, regional efforts will contribute to bringing lasting peace and stability in Yemen.

THIS screen grab from a video captures the moment a strike by Yemen's Aden-based government hit the Southern Transitional Council forces in Seiyun, a town in the Hadramaut region.—AFP

Doctors Without Borders warns of Gaza exit after Israel's ban

UN chief calls on Tel Aviv to reverse its decision

PARIS: Medical charity Doctors Without Borders said on Saturday it will be forced to end its operations in the Gaza Strip in March if Israel does not reverse a decision to ban 37 international humanitarian organisations from the territory.

Earlier, Israel confirmed it suspended the organisations from accessing the Gaza Strip after they refused to share lists of their Palestinian employees with government officials.

Israeli authorities said the lists are now officially required for "security" reasons to prevent bodies it accuses of supporting terrorism from operating in the Palestinian territories.

Doctors Without Borders, known by its French acronym MSF, called the demand a "scandalous intrusion," though Israel contends the measure is needed to stop Palestinians from "infiltrating humanitarian structures".

Meanwhile, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on Friday for Israel to end the ban, saying he was "deeply concerned" by the development.

Stephane Dujarric, a spokesperson for the secretary-general, said Guterres "calls for this measure to be reversed, stressing that international nongovernmental organisations are indispensable to life-saving humanitarian work and that the suspension risks undermining the fragile progress made during the ceasefire."

"This recent action will further exacerbate the humanitarian crisis facing Palestinians," Ms Dujarric added.

NGOs included in the ban have been ordered to cease their operations by March 1.

"To work in Palestine, in the occupied Palestinian territories, we have to be registered. ... That registration expired on Dec 31, 2025," Isabelle Defourny, a physician and president of MSF France while speaking to *France Inter* said.

"Since July 2025, we have been involved in a re-registration process and to date, we have not received a response," she said. "We still have 60 days during which we could work without being re-registered, and so we would have to end our activities in March" if Israel maintains the decision.

Ms Defourny said the Israeli decision is explained by the fact that NGOs "bear witness to the violence committed by the Israeli army" in Gaza.

MSF has roughly 1,200 staff members in the Palestinian territories — the majority in Gaza — including 40 international staff and some 800 Palestinian staff working across eight hospitals.

"We are the second-largest distributor of water (in the Gaza Strip)," Ms Defourny said. "Last year, in 2025, we treated just over 100,000 people who were wounded, burned, or victims of various traumas. We are second in terms of the number of deliveries performed."

Several NGOs have said the new requirements contravene international humanitarian law or endanger their independence.

On Thursday, 18 Israel-based left-wing NGOs denounced the ban on their international peers, stating that "the new registration framework violates core humanitarian principles of independence and neutrality".

The ban comes amid a fragile ceasefire in place since October, following the war waged by Israel in Gaza.

In November, authorities in Gaza said more than 70,000 people had been killed by Tel Aviv's military. According to UN data, nearly 80 per cent of buildings in Gaza have been destroyed or damaged, leaving infrastructure decimated.

About 1.5 million of Gaza's more than 2 million residents have lost their homes, said Amjad Al-Shawa, director of the Palestinian NGO Network in Gaza.—AFP

Thousands of Berliners face days without electricity

BERLIN: Tens of thousands of homes in Berlin will be without electricity until Thursday as authorities struggle to repair power cables seriously damaged in a suspected arson attack, officials said.

Some may also be without heating as the outage has affected local systems, at a time when the German capital is blanketed in snow and temperatures are hovering around freezing.

Emergency services were alerted early Saturday that several high-voltage cables on a bridge near a power plant had gone up in flames.

Firefighters quickly extinguished the blaze, but about 45,500 households and 2,200 businesses in districts in southwest Berlin were left without power, according to grid operator Stromnetz Berlin.

The extensive damage means that around 35,000 households will be without electricity until Thursday afternoon, Berlin authorities said in a statement.

Power should be restored to other homes by early Sunday.

"We are dealing with a particularly serious power outage affecting tens of thousands of households and businesses, including care facilities, hospitals, numerous social institutions, and companies," said Franziska Giffey, Berlin senator for economic affairs. The local district heating system — which transports heat around a pipe network in the area — is affected as it is powered by electricity.

Stromnetz Berlin warned that repair work "will take a very long time", with media reports saying that cold weather was hindering efforts to lay new underground cables.

Police deployed about 160 officers to the site of the incident in the Lichterfelde area and said they were "investigating on suspicion of arson".—AFP

Man killed, two policemen injured in Bajaur attack

By Anwarullah Khan

BAJAUR: A man was killed and three others, including two policemen, were injured when militants attacked a police post in Bajaur district's Barang tehsil in the early hours of Saturday.

Police and residents said the attack on the post, located in the hilly Kohi Sar area about 22 kilometres from Khar, the district headquarters, took place at around 2am.

District police spokesperson Israr Khan said the man who died was identified as 60-year-old Naseem Gul, a local resident.

He said the injured were constable Suliman Khan, 35; constable Saz Muhammad, 58; and Sahibzada, 28, a school watchman.

The injured were shifted to the District Headquarters Hospital in Khar, where their condition was said to be stable.

Mr Khan said the attackers used heavy and light weapons. He added that a joint team comprising police and security forces reached the area soon after the attack and launched an operation, forcing the assailants to flee.

Some reports, quoting police personnel at the post and residents, said the deceased had mobilised villagers to support the police and was shot when locals engaged the attackers.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. Police said it was the first such incident in Barang tehsil, which had largely remained peaceful during the recent wave of unrest in the district.

A large number of people, including senior officials of the district administration and police, attended the funeral of the deceased on Saturday evening in his native Kohi area, according to a statement from the district police officer's office. Deputy Commissioner Shahid Ali Khan and District Police Officer Waqas Rafique were among those present.

Meanwhile, PTI MPA Engineer Ajmal Khan, who belongs to Barang tehsil, visited the police post on Saturday to meet personnel posted there, according to a post shared on his social media account. The post said he was briefed on the attack and later visited the bereaved family to offer condolences.

FAO launches Year of Woman Farmer to highlight contribution to agriculture

• Women make up 40pc of the global agrifood workforce, nearly equal to men • In Pakistan, 74pc of working women are engaged in farm sector

By Amin Ahmed

ISLAMABAD: The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations has launched 'International Year of the Woman Farmer 2026', a global campaign aimed at recognising women's indispensable yet often overlooked contributions to global agrifood systems and to galvanising efforts to close persistent gender gaps.

Women make up a significant proportion of the world's agricultural workforce and play a central role across agrifood value chains — from production and processing to distribution and trade — while also ensuring household food security and nutrition. In 2021, agrifood systems employed 40 per cent of working women globally— nearly equal to men.

Despite their vital role, women's contributions remain undervalued and their working conditions are often more precarious: irregular, informal, part-time, low-paid work that is labour-intensive and highly vulnerable. Women continue to face systemic barriers, including limited access to land, finance, technologies, education, extension services and participation in decision-making at all levels.

In Pakistan, approximately 74 per cent of women and girls engaged in the labour force work in the agriculture sector, which generates about 40pc of household income. However, protection issues faced by women farmers remain poorly documented and insufficiently addressed.

An FAO report on women farmers in Pakistan highlights the need to amend labour and agriculture policies at the federal and provincial levels to recognise all women performing work related to crops, fruits, vegetables, livestock, fisheries, poultry, dairy, forestry and post-harvest production as "farmers", whether they work full-time or part-time, including those working on family farms without land ownership.

The report recommends setting a minimum wage for women farmers and ensuring wage parity with male agricultural workers for work of equal value. It also calls for the allocation of unused federal and provincial land to landless rural women farmers, along with access to water and input subsidies to support sustainable livelihoods.

Designated by the UN General Assembly in 2024, the International Year aims to highlight the challenges faced by women farmers and drive policy reforms and investment to advance gender equality, empower women and build more resilient agrifood systems. FAO, in collaboration with the Rome-based UN agencies — the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) — will coordinate activities throughout 2026.

Recent FAO reports, the Status of Women in Agrifood Systems and The Unjust Climate, reveal that women farmers typically cultivate smaller landholdings than men and face a 24pc productivity gap even on farms of equal size. Each day of extreme heat reduces the total value of crops produced by women farmers by three per cent compared to men.

Meeting on Gaza force to focus on mandate

Pakistan says ISF must be humanitarian and neutral, not aimed at disarming Hamas

By Anwar Iqbal

WASHINGTON: A New round of talks on a proposed International Stabilisation Force (ISF) for Gaza is expected in a Middle Eastern capital in the coming days, as Pakistan and other Muslim-majority countries seek clarity on the force's mandate, diplomatic sources told *Dawn*.

The ISF, a central element of a US-brokered Gaza peace plan, is envisioned to stabilise the territory following months of intense conflict, protect civilians and humanitarian corridors, and assist in establishing transitional governance through a proposed "Board of Peace".

However, several core issues remain unresolved, including the force's legal authority, chain of command, funding, duration, and whether it would play a role in disarming Hamas or other Palestinian groups.

Pakistan, Indonesia, Egypt, and other interested states have expressed willingness to participate in a stabilisation effort that genuinely restores order and facilitates humanitarian access. "They are prepared to join any credible international force that brings stability to Gaza," a diplomatic source said. "But they will not be part of a mission whose primary focus is disarming Palestinian resistance groups."

Hamas has rejected the idea of an international force tasked with disarmament, warning that such a deployment would be considered a party to the conflict rather than a neutral stabilising presence. This stance complicates efforts to secure broad regional participation and raises concerns about the safety and legitimacy of any deployed troops.

UNIVERSITY students take a selfie during their graduation ceremony in the courtyard of Al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City.—AFP

Pakistan remains cautious

Last week, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio described Pakistan's willingness to consider participation as "key" to the initiative and expressed gratitude for Islamabad's engagement. Pakistani officials, however, emphasise that no final decision has been taken yet, and that Islamabad has neither committed troops nor received a formal request.

Pakistan recently attended a US Central Command-hosted conference in Qatar with representatives from nearly 45 countries, where the operational framework of the ISF was discussed.

Reports suggesting Pakistan might deploy up to 3,500 troops remain speculative. Diplomatic sources stressed that any troop commitment would depend on a mandate that is fully transparent, politically neutral, and focused on humanitarian stabilisation rather than disarmament or law enforcement inside Gaza.

The ISF discussions, combined with Pakistan's broader engagement with Washington, reflect the delicate balancing act Islamabad faces: supporting humanitarian stabilisation in Gaza while safeguarding Pakistan's principles on Palestinian sovereignty. Analysts say that unless a mandate acceptable to all stakeholders is clearly defined, the force may struggle to attract broad participation and could encounter operational and political obstacles on the ground.

Experts also note that the involvement of countries like Pakistan is politically significant.

Islamabad has traditionally played a mediating role in Middle Eastern conflicts, balancing ties with Arab states, the United States, and the broader Muslim world. Any misstep in defining the ISF's role could complicate Pakistan's regional diplomacy, affect its credibility with partners in the Gulf, and influence its perception among Palestinians.

The coming meetings will be closely watched by both regional actors and Washington, as they may determine the pace at which the ISF is deployed. While humanitarian objectives remain central, the debates over mandate, command, and responsibilities illustrate the inherent complexity of deploying a multinational stabilisation force in a highly contested environment.

Printed at Pakistan Herald Publications (Pvt) Ltd by Khalil Mohsin and published for Pakistan Herald Publications (Pvt) Ltd by Shahjahan at Haroon House, Dr. Ziauddin Ahmed Road, Karachi. EDITOR: ZAFFAR ABBAS